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OPINION

JOHN HUGHES

Spies and secrets

FROM recent spy arrests we are learning that United States military secrets might have been compromised for as long as 20 years.

While the scope of the espionage may be reason for dismay, there should be little surprise that the Soviets have been so vigorously engaged in attempting to penetrate our secret defense data.

Such spying is given high priority in Moscow and there is an elaborate Soviet mechanism designed to purloin classified military information either from the US, or from allies with whom it is shared.

A lot of Soviet eavesdropping is by electronic means. Much information is collected by satellite spies in the skies. Some comes from Soviet submarines and spy ships cruising off America's coasts. A lot of information is collected by a Soviet monitoring station in Cuba that taps into the domestic American communications network.

Meanwhile, the Soviets will harvest an extraordinary communications bonanza from the new Soviet Embassy in Washington. Inexplicably, while a new American Embassy in Moscow is huddled downtown and fenced in by a number of obstructing buildings, the US has permitted the Soviets to build a new embassy compound in Washington on a hill that commands the entire capital.

It is a location that permits electronic spying on government, commercial, and private communications. Government buildings presumed targeted by the Soviets include the State Department, White House, Pentagon, and Central Intelligence Agency.

While the effort that goes into this electronic intelligence-gathering is substantial, the Soviets recognize that there is little substitute for good human intelligence — the agent on the scene who can find out what is in a crate that a satellite can photograph only from afar; the "mole" who can penetrate government conclaves; the persuasive tempter or blackmailer who can subvert key personnel and cause them to hand over top-secret codes, or photographs or designs.

Soviet embassies and consulates routinely include a high quota of KGB officers masquerading as diplomats, or chauffeurs, or other staffers. Sometimes they are identified and caught in some act of subversion. With diplomatic immunity they are declared *persona non grata* by the US and sent home, often without publicity by either the Soviets or the Americans.

But others keep on trying. Often the Soviet espionage campaign is pursued with extraordinary brazenness. The consular liaison official the Soviets tried to assign to the Olympic Games — and the defense-oriented Los Angeles area — was a KGB officer with a long record of spying. Soviet diplomats have been found roaming the halls of Congress seeking classified data shared by the administration with congressmen and senators.

Sometimes the Soviets are the beneficiaries of American laxness in guarding secrets. Sometimes, in an open society, the information they seek is there for the plucking from newspapers and technical journals.

Some US intelligence experts are bitterly critical of earlier cutbacks in human intelligence-gathering by the CIA and the substitution of electronic intelligence-gathering. They argue that it often takes years to implant good agents, for example in extremist Islamic terrorist organizations in the Middle East, and that American intelligence has lost its edge in much of the world by over-reliance on electronic data that are lacking in depth of penetration.

The latest arrests and pending trials will undoubtedly spark movement anew to curb the travels and activities of known Soviets in the United States. Some other governments, like the French and the British, have taken wholesale action against Soviet diplomats thought to be spies.

There may be merit in such action, but it is unrealistic to think that the Soviet Union will cease prying away at America's state secrets.

John Hughes, who won the 1967 Pulitzer Prize for international reporting, was assistant secretary of state for public affairs from 1982 to 1984.